



THE MEN WHO WOULD SPEARHEAD A RUSSIAN ATTACK—SOVIET PARATROOPS ON PARADE IN RED SQUARE, MOSCOW

IN THE peculiar morality of weaponry where the gun and the sword are more pukka by far than the knuckleduster or the switchblade knife, Ministers are hovering uneasily on the edge of one of the deadliest and most difficult choices in our military history.

By the end of May, when the NATO summit meets in Washington, Britain and the other members of the Alliance must decide in principle at least on whether to deploy a defensive system of supreme efficiency and relative cheapness: a system which could guarantee the security of the West against any armoured blitzkrieg by the Warsaw Pact and lend new credibility to the nuclear deterrent.

An ideal weapon. Yet the whole system, tailored for the needs of NATO and eagerly awaited by the generals might equally well prove to be a mistake pushing the world dangerously towards a new arms race, increasing the risks of nuclear exchange and provoking bitter political controversy in Europe. In the developing argu-

## A DREADFUL WEAPON—BUT CAN WE DO WITHOUT IT?

by MICHAEL TONER

ments about the Neutron Bomb, the stakes could not be higher.

Ever since the Americans let the cat out of the bag about the existence of the Bomb last year—infuriating the whole of NATO with their clumsiness—the issue has sunk into a confusion of political apprehension, military optimism and governmental embarrassment.

As might be expected, the Russians are noisily hostile to the whole thing on the grounds that it will be a new threat to world peace. And throughout Europe, the Left are beginning to campaign against the Bomb's deployment.

Even at Government level, there are doubts. Though the Americans are enthusiastic and the Germans cautiously receptive, the smaller NATO nations are uneasy about the implications for strategic arms control.

Britain meanwhile is sitting firmly on the fence, un-

willing to adopt any public attitude until the Germans have specially pronounced. Why this should all be so illustrates not merely the strange divide between acceptable and unacceptable ways of killing our fellow men but the fact that if the Neutron Bomb ever does go into NATO service, the strategic map of Europe will be utterly changed.

For the Bomb does what no weapon has been able to do before. With an instant emission of lethal radiation, it can kill every living thing within range—a range which might be as little as a couple of miles around.

### Massed

Yet at the same time, the blast and heat effects from the Neutron Bomb are sharply reduced.

To put it bluntly, if someone crudely creates mass slaughter without knocking too much of the place down.

Imagine then the NATO nightmare coming true. The massed tanks and guns of the Warsaw Pact have sprung without warning on the outnumbered forces of the West. Despite heavy losses, despite heavy setbacks here and there, the Eastern spearhead plunges deep into

the heart of West Germany. The desperate NATO generals know that they face the most crushing defeat. It will take weeks before any effective reinforcements can be brought over from America. In the face of the huge Russian submarine fleet in the Atlantic. Long before then, the conventional strength of the West will be overwhelmed.

Only one course is left, if the battle is not to be surrendered. Tactical nuclear weapons fired at the biggest concentrations of enemy forces could provide a breathing space, though at the enormous risk of escalating the conflict beyond redemption.

Fearsome though that risk is, many NATO countries would surely be willing to gamble. But would the Germans? Even with certain defeat staring the Alliance in the face, would the Germans permit the use of weapons which would devastate their own cities, perhaps killing millions of their own citizens?

For the Warsaw Pact knows the game too. Their armour and their guns would be hurled straight at the big cities in the hopes of finding some immunity behind civilian skirts.

Which is where the neutron bomb comes in. For its supporters argue with every appearance of conviction that the weapon can be used close to cities and big centres of population without causing utter ruin. The bomb is precise, they claim: its effects can be calculated more finely. And as well as saving buildings it should save lives. Or so they say.

Indeed, military scientists, upset at the way the weapon has so far been presented in the Press and elsewhere, are prone to lecture journalists on the absurdity of calling the thing a Neutron Bomb at all, on the grounds that the term is meaningless.

### Deadly

What we should all call it, they complain, is a Reduced Blast / Enhanced Radiation Weapon; though alas for accuracy, a Neutron Bomb it has been christened—and a Neutron Bomb it will forever remain.

Yet however hard the boffins try to set the record straight, however convincingly they argue that the Bomb is no deadlier than any other nuclear weapon—merely less physically destructive—the

political opposition grows steadily. On the most serious level, it is said that the Neutron Bomb could reduce the nuclear threshold dangerously.

If there is a conventional clash in Europe NATO would certainly think twice before pushing the conventional nuclear button not merely through fear of escalating the conflict but because even the smallest tactical nuclear weapons would do untold damage to German territory.

But if Neutron Bombs are available, with all their precision and limited effect, might there not be a temptation to use them sooner rather than later against the Russian tank formations? And since the weapons are undeniably nuclear, would not their employment provoke a devastating response?

Then again, there is the question of strategic arms control. With the East-West talks on nuclear limitation already bogged down, might not the deployment of this new weapon in the teeth of a well-orchestrated Russian opposition set back the hopes for progress still further?

And on a much more emotional level, how many Western Governments are willing to face political up-

roar, and the accusation that NATO is equipping with a "capitalist's bomb," which kills people and preserves property?

Nobody knows what the NATO decision will be. The Americans have said that they will only deploy the bomb in Europe if the Europeans agree—and there is no apparent enthusiasm.

### Blazing

In the end, my hunch is that Britain will eventually climb off the fence (with every appearance of reluctance) on the American-German side, though for domestic political reasons—such as the certainty of a blazing row within the Labour Party—Mr Callaghan and his colleagues would dearly love to postpone any action until after the election.

The military view, which I think will prevail, is that the Bomb will strengthen the credibility of the nuclear deterrent and that this advantage, in practice, worth the risk of lowering the nuclear threshold.

There is besides an appreciation among the generals that deployment of the weapon will force the Russians to

abandon the use of large concentrations of tanks in any attack on the West—thereby making the notion of a sudden attack less attractive, and less likely to succeed.

And in the worldwide game of military poker, there is another consideration. Throughout Eastern Europe, the Russians have already deployed two new weapons designed specifically to destroy the Western half of the Continent: the Backfire intermediate bomber and the SS-20 Continental missile.

The capacity of each is a major new worry to NATO chiefs. Each has the power to reduce our civilisation to a shambles. Could there be the elements here for a trade-off? Might Backfire and the SS-20 be pulled back in exchange for a NATO withdrawal of the Neutron Bomb?

Forlorn though that hope might appear—the Russians after all are quite capable of producing Neutron weapons for themselves—there are many in defence circles who cling to it.

Such are some of the considerations currently engaging the minds of NATO strategists. The rewards and penalties involved in their choice are set on a fearsome scale—which is why the next few months are critical for all of us.

For the planners and the military men have a word for what would happen if their options turn sour, if their calculations are mistaken: megadeath. Which involves us all.

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